Are the Toys For You Or the Child?

ARE you buying toys for your children this Merry Christmas—or for yourself?

However frivolous it may sound, this is the question being asked, now that the season is full of cheer and potentially dangling stockings, by the most serious man in the world—the child psychologist. For many and many a parent, he says, foists upon his child his own appreciation of the artistic—the bizarre—the ingenuous—not only buying what amuses himself, but playing with it afterward! This, says he further, is the reason for such things as character dolls, malformed animals and objects the like of which was never before seen or imagined. All of which resolves itself into a salient fact; novelty toys were made to sell to adults! And what, is asked, will be the result of the flood of "novelty" toys which is sweeping our nurseries?

The wee boy or girl endows toys with a wonderful and intense reality, quite different from anything to be imagined by the grown-up. Each toy possesses an individuality, wields an influence, psycho-analysis has shown, which far outlives childhood. Many a man's or woman's craze for the unusual or even the disagreeable has been traced back to impressions imparted by grotesque toys. In one case it was found that a woman who preferred an exceedingly ugly dog to children had never in her childhood possessed a doll which she could love and cuddle. Her mother, having penchant for the outlandish, surrounded her with cubist style playthings.

Benjamin Levin, child-psychologist and former assistant director of the George Junior Republic, points to the "kewpie" fad as a seasonal insanity which works ill effects on children.

"Adults considered kewpies 'cute'," Mr. Levin explains, "seeing in the little figures expression of their own fondness for curves. They promptly foisted the whole kewpie clan upon their children, and I believe I'm safe in saying that every teething child in the country has cut its palate on the knob at the top of the kewpie's head."

Extravagance, undeveloped moral sense, lack of muscular control in adults have all been connected up with toys played with in childhood. A woman who exhibited atrocious taste in selection of clothes, and took no care of what she wore, played with numerous French dolls in her childhood, none of which was so fashioned that its clothes might be taken off and put on. She therefore had no opportunity to acquire the habit of washing, ironing and mending. A man who was irresponsible in financial matters was directed by his parents, when a boy, to put his money in a toy bank. He found that the money could be shaken out, and spent without his parents' knowledge. A man totally devoid of initiative, and whose fingers were unusually awkward, was found to have played only with toys which wound up. Thus did the influence of the nursery penetrate adult life; and so was the ignorance of the parents worked out.

And yet the novelty toy has its place. "For the phlegmatic child it may be a good thing," says Levin, "as the means of shocking imagination into his system: In any case it is impossible to generalise. What is one child's medicine is another's poison; it is a matter for study and infinite care. It is absurd to establish chronological standards in children; as absurd as assuming that all children of the same age have the same measurements for their shoes and clothing."

Too many mechanical playthings which merely require "winding up" dull the initiative of the child, says the psychologist. There is less education, less development, in the several hundred dollar machine shop with everything true to life, than there is in a basket of blocks, and there is more enjoyment in a handful of pebbles from which a gold mine may be constructed or a fortress raised up than in all the toys ever imported from Germany.

"The poor little rich child is the one who suffers in the matter of toys," declares Levin. "While the rich little poor child is climbing the heights of imagination, the poor little rich child is studying French verbs and developing a most sophisticated attitude toward toys in general—a supercilious attitude toward anything not imported or direct from the Strauss New York house."

A further advantage of the basket of blocks is that they permit the tearing down process, instinctive in childhood, without destroying. The story of the little boy who tore a clock to pieces to see what made it go is only a recounting of logical fact, say those who know. That a child has the right to pull to pieces anything which it does not understand, they say further; the first instinct of the race being destruction. The second instinct, however, being that of construction, it is advisable that whatever is taken to pieces may be built up again, so developing the child mind normally.

However, there is no toy so much to be desired as the one which will make the labor of later life seem like play. The little broom, dishes, sewing basket will, if the little girl be truly feminine—impart lifelong subconscious impressions of the pleasures of sweeping and cooking.

"One of your keenest pleasures is derived from the cookie you kneaded and cut on the edge of your grandmother's breadboard, long ago," said Levin. "You never go into a kitchen where baking is in progress without remembering it; the odor of fresh pastry ever recalls it. It has traveled along the way of subconscious impressions and will remain with you always.

"In such manner is the toy to be made a vehicle of education fitting for after life. Dolls are the ideal plaything for girls, because every woman is a potential mother; all her life she mothers something. When she is a child it is her dolls; when she is ten years old it is the neighbors' babies. When she is grown up she mothers her husband. But the maternal instinct must be fostered. Boys must me allowed the amusements which encourage instincts of manliness.

"Boys cannot go through life in swaddling clothes and mothers should subordinate their natural anxiety to their sons' best good. Let them do the manly thing—skate and play football. Life all the way through is a chance. Why hamper the boy with useless fears?"

Children are acquisitive of learning through their eyes, ears or touch, or all of them; though few enough teachers find out through which sense the child learns easiest and then try to normalize the child by bringing up the other senses through exercise of play. A little girl who could not learn arithmetic had a highly developed sense of music. The multiplication table was set to music and taught with tunes and in a short time she was up to standard. An epileptic boy who had played with mechanical toys was given a small emery wheel from which sparks flew when he turned. The effect was remarkable.

"He was a nervous child," Levin explained, "and constant monotonous motion is soothing to the nerves. Another ideal provision for a nervous child is a sand pit, since it is soothing to play in sand. Whirling, exciting toys are very wrong for neurotic children.

"Another very bad thing for children is the bachelor uncle who goes into a toy store on the evening of December 23 and loads himself up with about a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of useless though ornate toys for his two nieces and one nephew. He buys a miscellaneous collection of junk which will do no one good and may do much harm. If grandparents, uncles and other relatives would put the money they expect to spend for the children's toys into one sum and allow the mother to buy with it, something rational might be made of Christmas toy buying."

The influence of war toys upon children—whether it be good or ill, is a thing to be decided by the parents themselves. Those who do not believe in war will, of course, select toys not suggestive of battle; others may wish to sew seeds of future preparedness via the mental suggestion route. Certain it is that war toys produce an effect.

"Toy dyspepsia" is a disease of the time from which most children suffer, according to Levin. "The average American child has so darn many toys that none holds any meaning. The child gets the benefit of any toy which appeals to its grown-up relatives and friends as 'cute' or as the conventional thing. If schoolbooks were bought as badly as our toys are, our educational system would be much rottener than it is—and it is rotten enough. There can be no denying that too many elaborate toys involving no necessity of the magic words 'let's pretend' dull the imagination and make the body slow and inactive."

Toys possess a further usefulness as a common ground between parents and children. Not for the parent who condescendingly consents to sit on the floor a few moments, but for the one who enters into the play with the spirit of childhood and as much as possible of the childish viewpoint in his heart. Such play helps the parent to better understand the child and builds up a "chums" relation. The attitude of parents or other members of the family toward a favorite plaything often builds up in the child's heart a subconscious dislike which materializes years later in family dissension.

Most important as an educational factor, says Levin, are children's books. Of tremendous value in character building, or of absolute poison-destroying character, they must be selected according to the child. "Ivanhoe," which may develop one boy's imagination, may sew seeds of race prejudice in the mind of another. What may shock a sense of color and dramatic values into a phlegmatic disposition may induce neurotic tendencies in a nervous organism. There is no rule which may be laid down for supplying children with books—excepting the rule which forbids the French novel type of literature.

"Sex matters must be explained by parents. When they are talked over among children they become distorted and hideous; only parents, or those assuming the place of parents, can present such things in their true light and prevent impressions which may mar a whole life."

A Gift of $2,000,000 to Mechanics and Tradesmen

GIFTS and bequests of nearly $2,000,000 to the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen by Amos F. Eno, an eccentric and wealthy resident of New York city, who died October 22, has brought to light a most useful organization that has been doing effective and far-reaching charitable and educational work for 130 years.

Organized in New York city at the close of the Revolutionary war to provide for worthy artisans in case of sickness and distress, and to promote and encourage by mutual aid the mechanical interests of the city, it has never departed from these aims, although its activities have been modified from time to time in conformity with the progress of society. Originally it was conducted along the lines of the old guilds of Europe, but the society has kept step with modern developments in every way.

The establishment of the public school system of New York city was influenced to a large extent by the success of schools maintained by the Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen. The founding of the Mechanics' bank by the society in 1810 had an important influence on the financial development of New York city in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Before his death Mr. Eno had transferred to the society property valued at $82,000, with a cash gift of $25,000. In his will he bequeathed to the society $1,800,000, with a desire "that a portion of said fund be used for elementary instruction and that such instruction be made available not only for those who are able to take extended, but also for relatively short, courses of instruction for those whose circumstances so require."

Amos F. Eno was one of the last of what New York city calls the "Washington Square millionaires." Eighty-two years old at the time of his death and worth from $10,000,000 to $12,000,000, he was one of the metropolis' least known millionaires. He gave millions fearlessly, but avoided publicity with the skill and ingenuity he used in multiplying fivefold the $750,000 he inherited from his father.

Eno made his money in real estate, not by approved methods of modern speculators, but by simply buying cheaply and holding on until the property increased in value. He refused to improve his holdings. He refused to participate in "booms." He refused to take part in any speculative venture. He simply bought where he could buy cheaply and retained his property until time and development of the city repaid him for the investment.

A veteran of both the Manhattan and Union League clubs, he moved in social circles even beyond the penetration of the latter day "400." He attended opera and first nights, gave exquisite and costly little dinner parties, and attended those of his chosen friends, but he had as great an abhorrence of the ceaseless whirl of modern society as he did of publicity. He successfully dodged both.

Millions he gave away, but mostly to deserving cases he knew of personally. He would never give a cent when solicited. He would never subscribe to organized charity in any form. He would never repeat a gift when his beneficence was made public.

One of the regrets of his life was that he could not become a member of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, because he was not a mechanic. Andrew Carnegie is a member and has contributed $500,000. The quiet, effective work of the society appealed to Eno as no other charity did.

The society was incorporated in 1792, although it had been in existence several years previously. The first meetings were held in the old coffee houses of New York. But in 1802 the growth of the society led it to build Mechanics hall, at Broadway and Park place, a four-story structure famous for many years.

The capacity of the school at present is limited to 2,300 students, with thirty-two instructors, teaching fifty-eight classes in the following subjects: architectural drafting, estimating for builders, mechanical drafting, sheet metal drafting, carriage and automobile drafting, free hand drawing, decorative design, modeling, arithmetic, algebra and geometry, trigonometry, workshop mathematics, applied mechanics, physics, and industrial electricity.